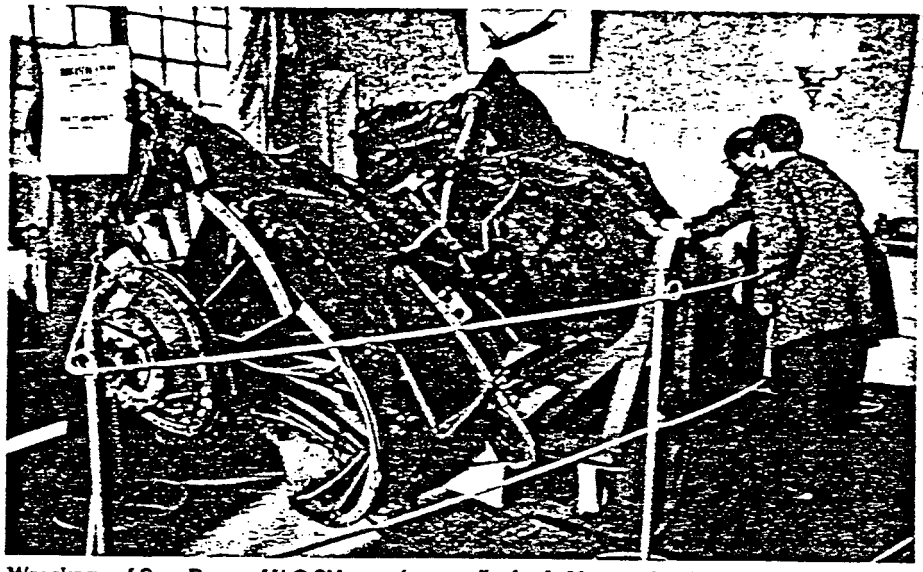
Was Lee Oswald a Soviet Spy?

A fascinating new portrait of Kennedy's assassin

Was Lee Harvey Oswald an informer who gave U.S. military secrets to the Soviet KGB? Was he involved in the famous downing of the U-2 spy plane? A tantalizing new book presents strong evidence that Oswald's connections with the KGB were closer and more devious than the public has been led to believe.

The book, *Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald*, is the result of 2½ years of work by *Reader's Digest* editors and researchers, who acquired many FBI and CIA documents under the Freedom of Information Act and, in addition, covered some 150,000 miles in 26 states and nine nations to interview Oswald's former associates. It was written by Edward Jay Epstein, a careful academic researcher whose 1966 book, *Inquest*, first revealed the flaws in the Warren Commission's investigation but did not conjure up any wild conspiracy theories.



Wreckage of Gary Powers' U-2 CIA spy plane on display in Moscow in 1960

Epstein still refuses to draw flat conclusions. Yet he weaves a skein of circumstantial evidence suggesting that Oswald learned key performance data on the CIA's U-2 plane while serving as a Marine radar controller at Atsugi, Japan, in 1957, and that he provided information to the Soviets either then or upon his defection to Russia in 1959. Oswald's information, the book suggests, enabled the Soviets to redesign their rocket-guidance systems so as to knock CIA Pilot Gary Powers out of the air over the Soviet Union on May 1, 1960.

Marine Oswald in 1958

Oswald's Marine specialty, radar controller, required above-average intelligence, and he ranked seventh in his training class in Biloxi, Miss. From visual, radio and radar observation at Atsugi, one base from which the U-2 operated, Oswald could have learned much about its speed, rate of climb and altitude.

Oswald, according to *Legend*, later told friends that he had moved in a Communist circle in Tokyo when off duty from Atsugi. Other Marines were surprised to learn that he spent some of his liberty hours at the Queen Bee, one of Tokyo's three most expensive nightclubs and a suspected hangout for intelligence agents from various nations. Even though dates there cost up to $100 a night and Oswald took home less pay than that in a month, he began appearing at Atsugi with one of the Queen Bee's prettiest hostesses. When he was assigned temporarily to Iwakuni, a U.S. airbase 430 miles from Tokyo, Oswald was seen with an attractive Eurasian woman. "She was much too good-looking for Bugs [Oswald]," said one Marine.

The book claims that the KGB coached Oswald in preparing a false diary of his 32 months in Russia so that U.S. intelligence sources would find Oswald's reasons for wanting to return to the U.S. credible. It never explains, however, exactly why the KGB was willing to help Oswald be repatriated or why it aided his Russian wife Marina, the niece of a military official in Minsk, in going to America with him. Nor does it imply that Oswald acted on KGB orders in killing President Kennedy.

After the 1963 assassination, according to *Legend*, the KGB planted a false defector called Nosenko in the U.S. for the specific purpose of convincing U.S. intelligence that Oswald had been considered so unreliable that the KGB had not even taken up his offer to divulge U.S. military secrets when he first arrived in Moscow.

Much of the book centers on the intrigue between the CIA and the FBI over Nosenko's credibility. Disinclined to believe him, the CIA drew up 44 questions that it wanted the FBI, which was debriefing Nosenko, to ask him. The FBI's J. Edgar Hoover refused to permit such questioning. The reason, according to Epstein, was that Hoover took pride in the information he was getting from another alleged KGB defector, called Fedora. Fedora had verified some portions of Nosenko's story—and if Nosenko had been shown to be a false defector, that would have meant that Hoover's source too was a KGB-planted double agent. Eventually, the CIA put aside its suspicions.

In retracing Oswald's movements after he returned to the U.S., the book is less persuasive in implying that he remained a KGB informant. It cites his temporary employment at a typesetting company in Dallas, where he gained access to Soviet and Cuban place names that the U.S. Army had contracted to strip into classified maps. The only KGB contact suggested in the book is the mysterious oil geologist George de Mohrenschildt, who befriended the Oswalds in the Dallas area. He is portrayed as exaggerating the Oswalds' marital problems in order to provide a reason for Oswald to move away from Marina. De Mohrenschildt, whose clouded past included contacts with various intelligence agencies, killed himself in 1977—two hours after being interviewed by Epstein for *Legend*.

Epstein claims that Oswald's pro-Cuba activities in the U.S. were designed to convince Havana officials that he was trustworthy enough to be admitted to Cuba in another planned defection from the U.S. The book traces Oswald's movements in Mexico City, and includes U.S.-monitored telephone conversations to the Soviet and Cuban embassies. Oswald's last known call in Mexico City was to make an appointment to see a Soviet official, described in the book as a member of the KGB department in charge of foreign espionage and assassinations. Oswald then returned to Dallas.

Yet several stubborn facts block any implication that Oswald was directed by foreign agents to hunt down Kennedy in Texas. He found his job in the Texas School Book Depository building by chance, and long before it was known that Kennedy planned to ride in a motorcade past the building. If the killing actually was planned by foreign agents, Oswald was the luckiest assassin in history. It is far more likely that he saw his unexpected opportunity—and took it. ■